

## Flounder House

The Structure today known as Flounder House, on the Royal Street side of the churchyard, was erected by the congregation to serve as a parsonage, or manse (minister's residence), in 1787 and is believed to be Alexandria's earliest structure to be constructed in this unusual 'flounder' architectural style.<sup>1</sup> The freestanding, two and one-half-story, center-hall residential structure originally included dormers in the roof and provided two and one-half above-ground floors of living space plus a basement. The Rev. Dr. Muir described it as a "commodious house" when he resided there with his wife, Elizabeth Muir, three daughters, son, and at least one servant at the close of the eighteenth century. Our sense of "appropriate dwelling space" has altered dramatically in two centuries (Larkin 2006).

Flounder House was constructed by Robert Brockett, master builder and brick maker who also built portions of Market Hall and numerous other structures in Alexandria. Brockett was paid £268 for the structure. He was a member of the congregation and is buried in the Presbyterian Cemetery. Flounder-style structures are characterized by a windowless side wall located immediately adjacent to the property line and a half-gable roof, with the windowless property-line wall being taller than the one facing the inside of the lot. The resulting "one-sided" structural character inspired them to be named for the similarly "one-sided" flounder fish. The style provides as much usable open space on narrow urban lots as possible, and is similar to the intense zero-lot-line residential developments that are popular in some parts of the country today. Old Town Alexandria is known for its large number of flounder-style residences, but they may also still be found in those cities, ranging from Philadelphia to St. Louis, that experienced building booms during the late eighteenth century and have had at least some of their inner-city residential areas survive. Alexandria once possessed as many as seventy-five of these unique structures, but today that number has diminished to fewer than twenty.

The Flounder House was first occupied as a parsonage by the Rev. Dr. Isaac Stockton Keith and subsequently was used by all clergy through closure of the historic congregation either as a residence or as a rental property when they chose to live elsewhere. Following the historic congregation's closure in 1899, Flounder House was extended to the east. It was used as a rental property for the next fifty years.

When the congregation was re-established in 1949, it first attended to the physical condition of the Meeting House, but then quickly turned to the badly deteriorated Flounder House. To transform Flounder House into spaces that would accommodate mid-twentieth century uses, the newly established congregation undertook its second major restoration-renovation of a historic structure — substantial repairs were made to the original portion of the structure and it was thoroughly renovated; the rather haphazardly constructed eastern extension of 1902 was removed and replaced; and the eastern end of the building was extended slightly to create space for a second stairwell. This undertaking was completed in September 1952 and provided space for administrative offices, meeting rooms, library, and kitchen, none of which had ever existed before!

<sup>2</sup>During the subsequent half century, spaces within Flounder House have been altered several times to accommodate increases in the number of staff members and in response to altered functional requirements. Major changes occurred, for instance, when the Education Building provided much needed new space when it was completed in 1957. Its most recent renovation occurred when church staff offices were relocated from Flounder House to Elliot House following that structure's restoration and extension in 2005. The reconfiguration made then continues to the present — three large meeting rooms, one on each floor; the Archives, in a room that originally served as the parlor of the parsonage; an office, currently being utilized by the Alexandria Tutoring Consortium, in a room that served as a study for pastors from 1952 to 2006; and a partial kitchen in the lower level. The numerous alterations that have occurred to what was once the private yard of the Flounder House are discussed in the section on the Courtyard.

#### FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup>Flounder House may be Alexandria's oldest structure of this style; see Feldhaus (1986) and Martin (1986).

<sup>2</sup>The congregation's pride in its just-renovated Flounder House and recently renovated Meeting House facilities was perhaps a factor in Session's inviting the two local Presbyteries to convene at the Meeting House on Veteran's Day, 11 November, 1952. The two bodies — Presbytery of Potomac of the Presbyterian Church in the U.S. and Presbytery of Washington City of the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. — separate since the Civil War, convened in joint session and worshipped as one body here for the first time since they had separated (the two bodies merged into one when the larger denominations united in 1983). All were served lunch in Flounder House.